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[Book Review of] *Morals, Science, and Sociality: The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science Volume III*, edited by JH. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. and Daniel Callahan

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Morals, Science, and Sociality: The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science

Volume III

H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. and Daniel Callahan, Editors

The Hastings Center, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1978. x + 339 pp., $7.95 (paper).

This volume, the third in a projected series of four, contains the proceedings of meetings held at the Hastings Center where scholars of several disciplines were invited to speak on the relation of science to ethics. This general issue comprehends any number of distinct topics, all well-known landmarks in the topography of the is-ought gap: Can one deduce ethical principles from scientific truths and, if so, which science and which truths? Does science itself, either as an activity or as a body of knowledge, presuppose certain moral principles? If so, which ones? What, exactly, is the difference between ethics and science?

An anthology on "ethics and science" runs the risk of being ill-focused if it attempts to deal with too many of these topics, and the present collection of loosely-related papers does not escape this problem. The wide variation among these papers in terms of style, difficulty, and level of abstraction, though undoubtedly in part an unavoidable by-product of the editors' desire for interdisciplinary exchange, reinforces the centrifugal forces at work. Nevertheless, several excellent papers can be found here and might serve to attract readers interested in the topics they pursue.

As it happens, the two most rewarding essays keep to ethical theory and ignore science altogether. In the first of these, Gerald Dworkin examines and rebuts successively weaker versions of the "view of the moral agent as necessarily autonomous." This is the claim that, roughly speaking, each moral agent must make an independent choice of moral principles and must accept full responsibility for the content of his moral code. This view, or something like it, is taken as boringly obvious by most secular moralists (and many religious moralists as well), and Dworkin's opposition to it endows his essay with special interest. Dworkin's delineation of six distinct theses which approximate the claim of moral autonomy provides the debate with needed precision of thought; his evaluation of each version, negative for each, save the very weakest, challenges the prevailing complacent acceptance of this view as well. Careful contemplation of his essay would reward anyone who reflexively insists that each person is his or her only legitimate source of moral authority.

In the other outstanding paper, Gregory Vlastos provides an account of the conception of justice embodied in Plato's *Republic*, which he locates in a principle of "functional reciprocity": to each according to his needs in performing his function for the community. The distribution of burdens and benefits which results from this principle is distinctly inegalitarian, but, as Vlastos shows, it is clearly distinguishable from mere oligarchic privilege. Vlastos goes beyond reconstruction to argue that functional reciprocity fails as a conception of justice even by Plato's own standards since it contradicts what Vlastos believes to be a feature of every morality, including Plato's, namely that all members of the community have an equal right to benefit by the observance of moral rules and an equal right to pass judgment on the basis of them. Plato's principle has obvious echoes in present-day ordinary morality (though, of course, many of the background

assumptions are different), and if Vlastos' claim of a right to equal consideration proves to be destructive to it, his paper will be of more than historical interest.

The papers which do address science's relation to ethics are generally less enlightening (at least on that topic). Alasdair MacIntyre addresses one key question directly, namely whether scientific work intrinsically presupposes certain moral principles. MacIntyre argues against the recent subjectivist wave in philosophy of science — a wave which has anyhow crested — by stressing realism as a regulative ideal which, to MacIntyre, is moral in character. Thus he says that the historical course of science is understandable only if we view science as resting on moral foundations. However, the precise sense in which realism is a moral stance, and hence in which "science is a morality," was not made clear to this reader. Other "regulative ideals," such as logical consistency, are not moral in any interesting sense, and the reader is left wondering why realism is any different.

Loren Graham offers a discussion of genetics and politics in Russia and Germany in the twenties, showing that the later official pro- and anti- Lamarckian stances of the Communist and Nazi governments, respectively, could not have been predicted with complete confidence. The moral of this interesting story — that the seeming affinity of the respective political ideologies and scientific theories was undetermined by the theories — is instructive in the case presented, but, as another contributor remarks, whether and to what extent this is a general truth cannot be established by a single example. In any case, the resulting thesis on science's relation to ethics is not a particularly deep one; the study is historical rather than philosophical.

Richard Alexander's essay provides a sociobiological account of law, ethics and many other elements of culture; like many such accounts it both prevents an intriguing perspective on what it seeks to explain and simultaneously invites disbelief by its undisciplined speculation. Alexander claims to have shown that "the" function of law in society is to regulate its individuals' efforts to reproduce so as to assure social cohesion, which in turn fosters reproduction; and he locates the cause of societies' existence in the need to protect their members from the predations of similar groups of humans. Alexander marshalls two sources of support for these hypotheses. The first is the Darwinist thesis itself, modified by contemporary theory: the principle of differential reproduction explains all. The second consists of numerous "predictions" of what culture would be like were Alexander's hypotheses true — all of which turn out to match reality. These "predictions," however, have been too carefully chosen. Thus Alexander "explains" why rape is often a capital offense by pointing out that rape "may directly interfere with a man's chances of reproducing via his spouse, sister, daughter, or other female relatives" (p. 268); but then why is alienation of affection treated so lightly? Similarly, Alexander "predicts" and confirms that "flashy dressing and abandonment of spouses and families and lawbreaking will be concentrated in men who are young . . . [and poor] . . . and are recognizable as members of minority or other disadvantaged groups"; but why is this true only of *some* such groups, and then only of some of those groups' members? Alexander explains contradictory evidence away as "misdirected vestiges" of the very force he posits; but the data he cites as direct support of his theory might as likely be a misdirected vestige of some other force. Besides, Alexander's chief argument, that the universality of differential reproduction as an explanation of life forms cannot be ignored, can be met without ceding Alexander any cultural territory. As Kenneth Schaffner points out in his commentary, we may acknowledge a Darwinian account of the early origins of cultural patterns without counting on differential reproduction to explan culture's subsequent development. The very vagueness of Alexander's account of contemporary culture further supports Schaffner's counter-speculation.

Alexander's paper covers only the "is" side of the is-ought gap in any case;

Alexander disavows any normative conclusions. Nor are links between science and ethics forged successfully by the remaining papers. We are offered two essays on Freud, one resolutely historical and the other tied in to the book's theme only via a quick sketch of a quite abstract thesis on psychological explanation. Each paper is interesting in its own right, but the reasons for their inclusion in the present volume (other than historical completeness) are unclear. Robert Solomon's concluding essay is notable for the pointed clarity of the remarks in which he chides his fellow-contributors for failing to address the book's central topics. Two further essays, one on motivations for doing scientific work and the other on the explanation of inconsistency in ethics, are rather lacking in content, at least in comparison to other available works on the topics they address.

Why, then, this book? The papers on ethical theory would be at home in professional journals, which contain many others like them. The papers which address one or another aspect of the relation of science to ethics are a very mixed group. Several race along using technical vocabulary without explanation and could hardly enlighten a non-philosopher; others seem to aim for a popular audience. Several of the papers have value chiefly as intellectual history, and others are occasions for undisciplined theorizing which would have a hard time finding a way into the journals. The diversity of topics addressed detracts from the primary goal of providing numerous viewpoints on an issue of common interest.

The potential reader interested in ethical theory or intellectual history will find rewarding material here. The physician looking for enlightenment on issues involving the relation of science to ethics might be stimulated by several of the other papers to refine his or her thinking in this area — though he or she might also be mystified or even misled. As a record of an attempt to foster communication between scholars of different disciplines with very different perspectives on ethics — which was in fact the intent of those who convened these meetings — the book furthers the worthy mission of the Hastings Center. The consumer, however, might have been better served by a collection of essays from journals and other sources, chosen for clarity, strength of argument and accessibility.

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